



**Between The Floods Of The Senegal River, The
Silent Thirst Of The Bediks OF Kedougou, Soil
Salinization and Climate Refugees**

By Abou KA

INTRODUCTION

In Senegal, climate change is no longer just a theory. It has a face. It has a voice. It has stories. I have seen many faces of this crisis. I still remember one story: a rice field completely submerged in water. But beneath that water lay months of labour, seeds sown with hope and a family's dreams; the farmer looked at what remained of his harvest. After a few minutes, he simply murmured: "It's all gone." The story varies depending on the area: in the mountains of Kédougou, among the Bediks, I saw communities living with thirst; in the groundnut-growing region, I saw the land become salty and barren, and in Khar Yalla, I met families who had been forced to leave their land, becoming climate refugees in their own country.



The age of relentless drought

The Senegal River has always been regarded as a blessing. It serves as a source of irrigation for rice cultivation and for small-scale fishing, and has been an integral part of the lives of the communities that have lived on its banks for generations. But over the last two years, the river seems to have changed. During the rainy season, the water rises more rapidly. Floods have become unpredictable and violent. In 2024, flooding along the Senegal River affected around 55,600 people in several regions of the north of the country, notably in Matam, Saint-Louis and Bakel. Hundreds of homes were flooded, and over 1,000 hectares of crops were destroyed. But behind these figures lie stories. In just a few days, months of work had vanished. In some villages, residents had to leave their homes to settle

temporarily on higher ground. Entire families slept in schools or with relatives. The losses are not just agricultural. They are also human. Children can no longer go to school when the roads are submerged. Health centres become difficult to reach. Livestock sometimes die for lack of shelter. Some estimates put agricultural losses in the valley at over 38 billion CFA francs. But what strikes most is the sense of uncertainty. People know that these phenomena are becoming more frequent. And they simply ask themselves: "When will it stop?" Whilst some areas are facing a surplus of water, other parts of the country are experiencing the opposite situation, characterised by a growing shortage of water resources, as it is the case in Kédougou.

AT THE BEDIKS OF KEDOUGOU: THE SEARCH FOR WATER

More than 700 kilometres from the Senegal River valley, in the Bandafassi mountains, life is very different. Here, water does not destroy villages. There is simply not enough of it. The Bédiks, a small community living in the hills of the Kédougou region, inhabit villages perched high in the mountains. These villages, such as Ethiolo, are beautiful but very isolated. Here, wells are no longer sufficient to meet the needs of the population. As a result, women and girls walk several kilometres every day to find water. This journey can take two to three hours. Imagine starting every day with a long, tiring walk simply to fill a jerry can. This situation has profound consequences: some girls drop out of school; farming becomes difficult; water-related diseases are on the rise. In the Kédougou region, only 72% of the population has access to an improved water source, and access to sanitation remains very low. Beyond issues related to water availability, climate change is also affecting soil quality, particularly through the phenomenon of salinisation in the groundnut-growing region.



THE GROUNDNUT-GROWING REGION: WHEN THE EARTH BECOMES SALTY:

In the groundnut-growing region, which covers areas such as Fatick, Kaolack, Diourbel and Kaffrine, another form of loss is taking place. It is less visible, but just as dramatic. The soil is becoming saline. Rising sea levels, combined with reduced rainfall and soil degradation, are causing the gradual salinisation of agricultural land. In some areas, fields that once produced groundnuts, millet or sorghum are gradually becoming infertile. Farmers are observing a worrying phenomenon: plants are struggling to grow, harvests are shrinking, and sometimes nothing grows at all. According to some estimates, thousands of hectares of farmland are now affected by salinisation in the groundnut-growing region. A farmer from the Fatick region explained to me, "Before, the land fed our children. Today, it is turning white and hard." This whiteness is the salt rising to the surface. Little by little, the land is losing its fertility. These environmental changes have profound human consequences, even leading to the forced displacement of populations, as illustrated by the situation of the communities in Khar Yalla.



KHAR YALLA: SENEGAL'S CLIMATE REFUGEES

A few kilometres from the centre of Dakar, a neighbourhood silently tells the story of thousands of Senegalese displaced by climate change. This neighbourhood is called **Khar Yalla**. Behind its sandy alleyways and hastily built houses lies a little-known reality: that of the climate refugees displaced by coastal erosion in Saint-Louis. A sea that advances, villages that disappear. For several decades, **coastal erosion** has been gradually eroding the coast of the Langue de Barbarie, in the historic city of Saint-Louis. Rising sea levels and more frequent storms have destroyed hundreds of homes, swept away schools, mosques and the memories of entire generations.

The phenomenon worsened after the breach opened on the Langue de Barbarie in 2003, an event that profoundly altered the flow of water between the ocean and the Senegal River.

What was intended to be a temporary solution to prevent flooding has become one of the factors accelerating erosion. Every year, the sea erodes several metres of land. Fishermen see their homes swallowed up and their livelihoods disappear. For many, the only option is to leave. As a result, several families have left their coastal villages in search of refuge elsewhere. Some have settled in Khar Yalla, a village that has unwittingly become a haven for these climate refugees. These families often arrive with no resources, having lost their homes, their canoes or their livelihoods. In Khar Yalla, they rebuild their lives with whatever means they have at their disposal: small tin-roofed dwellings, informal work, and community solidarity. But climate displacement is not limited to material loss. It is accompanied by social and cultural disruption.



Fishing communities accustomed to living in tune with the ocean must adapt to urban life, far from their original environment.

All of these examples highlight the diversity and severity of climate change impacts in Senegal, calling for urgent, integrated responses tailored to local realities.

CONCLUSION

From the flooding of the Senegal River to the water shortages in the Bédik villages of Kédougou, via the salinisation of land in the groundnut-growing region and the forced displacement of families from Khar Yalla, one thing is clear: climate change is no longer a distant threat to Senegal. It is already at work, and its consequences are resulting in very real losses and damage.

However, beyond the figures and reports, it is above all human lives that are being upended. These are farmers whose fields are disappearing beneath the water, women forced to walk long distances to access water, once-fertile land rendered unproductive by salinisation, and families forced to leave their villages in search of more sustainable living conditions.

Faced with this reality, these communities are not merely asking for assistance: they are demanding to be heard, for they possess knowledge, practices and adaptive capacities that are essential tools for tackling the climate change crisis.

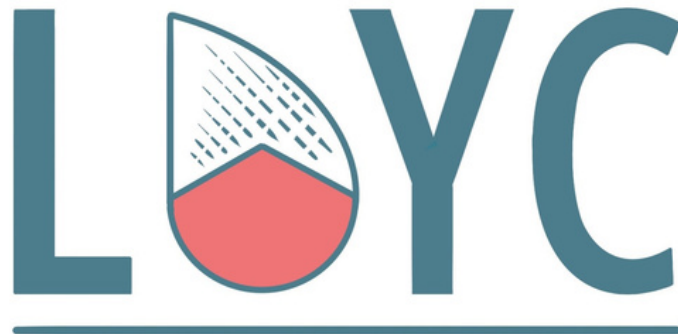


Thus, discussing climate-related loss and damage in Senegal raises a fundamental question of justice. Justice for rural communities that are disproportionately affected by a crisis to which they have contributed very little. Justice for regions that struggle every day to preserve their livelihoods, their identity and their dignity.

In this context, international recognition of loss and damage, particularly in global climate negotiations, appears to be an essential step towards ensuring fair, appropriate and accessible financing mechanisms for the most vulnerable communities.

A story collected by Abou KA

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